Consumers now have easier access to information about preventing and dealing with nuisance calls and messages, following the launch of new consumer guides from Ofcom.

The first guide is a short online educational video that offers tips and advice on nuisance calls. It is available with subtitles to help people with hearing impairments.

The second guide provides advice on preventing nuisance calls in an ‘Easy Read’ format, designed to be easily understood by people with learning disabilities. Easy Read presents information clearly and simply, using pictures to support the meaning of the text. It can also be helpful for those with a limited knowledge of the English language.

The new guides are part of Ofcom’s work to help ensure that consumer information about nuisance calls and messages is accessible to a wide audience. Recent Ofcom research revealed that a third (32%) of consumers were unsure of where to get advice on preventing nuisance calls.

A number of organisations including Age UK, Citizens Advice, Mencap, StepChange, Which?, Helplines Partnership and the Communications Consumer Panel have been helping to promote the guides.

Measuring the problem
Ofcom published findings from its second annual study into the problem of nuisance calls.

It found the proportion of nuisance calls relating to payment protection insurance (PPI) had reduced significantly in Jan-Feb 2014, compared to the same period last year. PPI accounted for 13% of all nuisance calls where the product or service could be identified – down from 22% in 2013 – although it remained the most common type of unwanted call.

Since the same period last year there had, however, been increases in calls about home or loft insulation (2% to 8%), solar panels (2% to 6%) and other products related to home improvements (3% to 7%).

For the full report please see here.
Tackling the problem

Tackling nuisance calls and messages is a complex and challenging issue, requiring a co-ordinated effort from Government, regulators, industry and consumer groups.

Ofcom has a joint action plan with the Information Commissioner’s Office, setting out priority areas of work for both organisations. As well as improving consumer information, Ofcom is also making progress in the key areas of enforcement and tracking down companies behind nuisance calls.

Targeted enforcement action

Ofcom continues to pursue a number of companies suspected of making silent and abandoned calls. Most recently, investigations were opened into Ageas 50 Limited, trading as RIAS and Castle Cover, Sambora Communications Incorporated and Green Deal Savings Limited.

Ofcom is also reviewing its silent and abandoned calls guidelines. The review will explore whether there is scope for strengthening these and will look at any relevant developments in call centres’ practices and technology.

Tracking down the companies behind nuisance calls

Tracing companies responsible for nuisance calls can be challenging, especially when they hide their identity by causing a false phone number to display – a practice called ‘number spoofing’.

Ofcom has therefore been working with an industry standards setting body (NICC) on a new call tracing standard that will make it easier to track down companies behind nuisance calls. Following successful testing, the standard will now be put into practice by industry and Ofcom.

Improving quality of service in repairs and installations

Telephone and broadband customers can expect improved line repairs and installations, under draft decisions which Ofcom has notified to the European Commission.

Under the changes, the vast majority of phone and broadband faults would have to be repaired within two working days, while most customers wanting a new line must receive an appointment within 12 working days.

These targets are expected to apply from this summer and are set out in new minimum performance standards for Openreach, the company that installs and maintains connections to BT’s network on behalf of competing providers.

Should Openreach fail to meet the new targets, it would face sanctions from Ofcom, which could include fines. Ofcom will also monitor Openreach’s performance closely, and intervene further if required.

Tablets help drive increase in older people going online

The number of people aged 65 and over accessing the internet has risen by more than a quarter in the past year, driven by a three-fold increase in the use of tablet computers to go online, new Ofcom research reveals.

This has helped to drive overall internet use up from 79% of adults in 2012 to 83% in 2013, according to Ofcom’s Adults’ Media Use and Attitudes Report, published in April.

The proportion of people aged over 65 that are accessing the web reached 42% in 2013, up nine percentage points from 33% in 2012, which is a 27% increase over the year. One reason for this is an increase in the use of tablet computers by older people aged 65-74 to go online, up from 5% in 2012 to 17% in 2013.
Subtitles are used by over a million people with hearing impairments to watch TV. Addressing concerns from viewers, Ofcom last year required broadcasters to start reporting on the quality of live subtitles to identify areas for improvement. The report samples the accuracy, speed and latency – the delay between speech and the corresponding subtitle appearing – of live TV subtitles. It is the first of four reports on live subtitling Ofcom is producing over a two-year period.

Viewers have told Ofcom that poor latency is one of the most frustrating aspects of live subtitling, often resulting in a disjointed viewing experience.

Samples of BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky programmes showed that the median latency was 5.6 seconds, which exceeds the recommended guideline of a maximum three seconds delay.

The speed of subtitling (words per minute displayed on screen) can also impact the viewing experience. The subtitles sampled met the current guidelines for a maximum speed of 160-180 words per minute. Ofcom will review these guidelines in light of the data gathered over the four reports to see if they are appropriate for viewers.

Accuracy, another key measure, was rated as generally good by researchers that audited the data on behalf of Ofcom. They consider that 98% of subtitled words being accurate on live programmes is an acceptable standard (see Figure 2 in the report). However, accuracy did fall below 98% on some occasions.

**Improvements to subtitles**

In requiring broadcasters to measure quality of subtitles regularly, Ofcom expects them to identify and act upon opportunities to improve live subtitling to benefit viewers.

As part of the drive to improve subtitles, Ofcom will ask broadcasters to consider how latency can be reduced and whether, for example, they can take advantage of any small delays in the transmission of live programmes to improve latency.

Ofcom also remains concerned that a significant number of pre-recorded programmes are provided to broadcasters too close to transmission to allow subtitles to be prepared in advance. This results in lower quality subtitles for viewers. For this reason, Ofcom is asking broadcasters for a further report on how they produce subtitles for pre-recorded programmes during the second half of 2014, and will publish the findings next year.

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**Delay to the launch of the next generation text relay service**

Ofcom was very disappointed that the next generation text relay service, developed by BT, was not launched in time to meet the long-standing deadline of 18th April.

BT informed Ofcom that its testing of the new service revealed technical problems relating to the connection of emergency calls. Access to emergency calls is a critical factor underpinning Ofcom’s approval of any next generation text relay service.

We have been working to ensure that BT, with any necessary co-operation from the rest of industry, does what is needed to deliver a fully operational service as soon as possible. The latest BT updates on the launch can be found here.

We have also opened an investigation into BT’s compliance with its obligations to its customers under General Condition 15 in relation to next generation text relay. Further information about the investigation can be found here.
Superfast broadband surge but challenges remain to address speed mismatches

One in four UK residential fixed broadband connections is ‘superfast’, according to latest Ofcom research.

The proportion of superfast connections – those offering headline speeds of 30Mbit/s or more – has risen from 5% in November 2011 to 25% in November 2013.

And the average superfast connection speed has continued to rise, reaching 47.0Mbit/s by November 2013 – an increase of 47%, or 15.1Mbit/s, since May 2010.

Ofcom’s broadband speeds report also reveals that at 17.8Mbit/s, the average actual fixed-line residential broadband speed in the UK is almost five times faster than it was five years ago when Ofcom first began publishing the data (up from 3.6Mbit/s in November 2008).

Differences across the country

While the growth in average speeds shows that investment in broadband technology is delivering benefits for most consumers, the UK picture is uneven. A significant number of households, especially those in rural areas, can experience considerably slower speeds.

One key reason for the slower speeds in rural areas is the limited availability of superfast broadband services. In addition, broadband speeds over ADSL, a technology that uses the copper wire telephone network, are generally slower in rural areas because of the longer distances to the telephone exchange.

Problems with slower broadband speeds are not just confined to rural communities but can also affect urban areas. Most recently Ofcom published a report looking at how broadband coverage varies between UK cities.

Addressing the disparity

The Government is helping to improve broadband availability by:

• committing funding to extend superfast broadband coverage to 95% of UK premises by 2017, while ensuring that a minimum service of 2Mbit/s is available to all; and

• exploring with industry innovative ways to reach at least 99% of premises by 2018.

While good progress is being made, more work is needed to deliver wider availability of broadband and superfast broadband, particularly in rural communities but also in some locations within cities to enable wider access to fast internet.

Ofcom will use the full extent of its powers and resources to help achieve this goal.

CONTACT US

We’d really welcome your views on our Consumer Bulletin. Please e-mail rapinder.newton@ofcom.org.uk or call 020 7783 4897 if you have any views on how we can improve the next issue.